DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 261 817 RC 015 450

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TITLE	Small School Principals and Effective School-Community Relations. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Las Cruces, N. Mex.
SPONS AGENCY	National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	Jun 84
CONTRACT	400-83-0023
NOTE	10p.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Administrator Role; Citizen Participation; *Community Involvement; Community Role; Elementary Secondary Education; *Principals; Rural Education; Rural Population; *Rural Schools; School Activities; *School Community Relationship; School Role; *Small Schools
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

In rural areas the responsibility for good school-community relations rests with the principal, who must develop a strategy for community relations, understand the people of the community and their values, and know their formal and informal leaders. School principals can use various strategies to increase community involvement. They can simply extend an invitation to visit the school, allow the school building to be used for community activities, actively recruit community volunteers, and publish a school newsletter. One study showed positive school-community relations in schools that allowed citizens to use the library, advertised events in the news media, or had a cafeteria or gym open to community members. Because small and rural schools are often closely identifed with the community, community cooperation is usually easy to secure and community members may be eager, or at least willing, to assist. They can serve on staff development planning committees, identify community resources, teach minicourses on local history, serve on advisory boards for various programs, and help to recruit teachers who fit the community. A key to good school-community relations may be community-minded administrators and teachers who participate in civic activities outside the school and feel comfortable in the community. (JHZ)

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ERIC DIGEST

SMALL SCHOOLS

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SMALL SCHOOL PRINCIPALS AND EFFECTIVE SCHOOL-COMMUNITY RELATIONS

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WHAT ARE THE GOALS FOR SCHOOL-COMMUNITY RELATIONS?

Because the school is an integral part of each community, the relationship between school and community should be positive in order to be of mutual benefit. Positive school-community relationships result in the best possible educational environment for students which, in turn, benefits both school and community. The principal of a small school has the most direct responsibility for school-community relations. As a manager, the principal is concerned with efficiently meeting school goals through sound organization. Blake and Mouton (1974) state that there are three universal characteristics of organizations: purpose, people, and power. Good school-community relations often rest on the principal's understanding and management of these three characteristics.

Purpose: To improve rural education, the principal needs to develop a strategy for school-community relations. Determining community assumptions regarding the purposes of school-community relations, including extent of involvement, is a first step. It may then be necessary to provide the community with information on the benefits of positive relations.

People: With whom is the principal dealing? Who are the people of the community? What are they like? What do they value? Answering these questions at the outset of working in a community is a positive start.

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Power Hierarchy: Avoiding misunderstanding often involves knowing who is who in the community. Both formal leaders and informal leaders influence relations (Rogers, 1983).

Proper management of these three organizational traits requires consideration of several factors:

- There are two parties involved in school-community relations. It is important to determine what each party can do to assist in positive relations.

- The possibility for problems exists in any situation.

- Assessment of school-community relations is needed to determine how well things are going.

- There are measures a principal can take to increase positive community involvement.

WHAT CAN THE PRINCIPAL DO?

Principals interact with the community at large in many ways. They are responsible for: (1) interpreting school programs to the community; (2) determining community expectations of the school; (3) communicating with parents through the media and in group conferences; (4) having parents visit the school; (5) working with parent associations and related groups; (6) interacting with school critics; (7) planning and coordinating the visits of school people to homes of students; (8) initiating special publicity campaigns; (9) supporting student publications; (10) appraising school-

community relations; (11) working with industry and community image groups; and (12) determining the community power structure (Wilson and Stansberry, 1976).

Several studies state that more attention should be paid by principals to recruitment and selection of community-minded teachers. Lewis and Edington (1983) conclude that administrators should recruit teachers with positive community ties. The most successful teachers appear to be those who are welcome in community homes, participate in community activities, and invite community members to their homes (McBeath and others, 1983b). Seifert and Kurtz (1983), as well as Lewis and Edington (1983), even advise principals to actually involve community members in recruiting and selecting teachers who fit their communitites. Recruitment materials should include community information (Seifert and Kurtz, 1983).

Administrators who have a community-oriented philosophy are more likely to have positive school-community relations (Charlton, 1983). McBeath and others (1983a) claim a need among principals, particularly new ones, for civic activities outside the school.

WHAT CAN THE COMMUNITY DO?

Because small and rural schools often are closely identified with the community, community cooperation is not difficult to secure (Pelton, 1983). Many people in the community may be anxious, or at least willing, to do their part in making community relations positive. Various authors suggest that citizens are often willing and effective in assisting the school by:

- Serving on staff development planning committees.

- Identifying resource people in the community.

- Teaching minicourses on local history, industry, and interesting area people. Agency staff members and experts can teach such courses. Examples: District attorney on juvenile justice or social workers on child abuse (Pelton, 1983).

- Serving actively on advisory boards for various programs (Lewis and Edington, 1983).

- Assisting in the recruitment of teachers who fit the community (Seifert and Kurtz, 1983; Lewis and Edington, 1983).

ARE THERE EVER PROBLEMS?

As might be expected, everything does not always go smoothly in school-community relations. In a study of rural Alaskan schools, McBeath and others (1983a) reported a majority of principals felt that parents expected to be involved in the operation of the school or its processes. On the other side of the coin, less than half of the principals reported being involved in civic and community affairs unrelated to the school.

A principal might face the following dilemmas in managing positive school-community relations: (1) school boards and administrators that are fearful of losing control; (2) the need to be all things to all people; (3) a

sense that wide disagreement exists about the meaning of community involvement; and (4) reluctance of some teaching staff to cooperate in community involvement (Husen, 1982).

HOW CAN THE PRINCIPAL EVALUATE SCHOOL-COMMUNITY RELATIONS?

Ways of evaluating school-community relations are numerous. Because of limited time, a principal needs to determine carefully which methods are most feasible in each situation. Possible means of evaluation include:

- Needs assessments conducted among local businesses and/or citizens' groups to determine community needs for various programs.

- Follow-up studies of graduates.

- Citizen/faculty/administration team reviews of school-community relations.

- Surveys of staff memberships in churches, service clubs, etc.

HOW CAN THE PRINCIPAL INCREASE COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT?

Bruner (1981) lists 10 ways to get the community to come to the school: (1) simply extend an invitation; (2) make the back-to-school night exciting and productive; (3) set up a community resource file; (4) stage a curriculum fair or exhibit; (5) conduct career days; (6) use parent conferences to explain school programs and to resolve misunderstandings; (7) allow the school

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building to serve community activities; (8) facilitate open discussion (e.g., at a school lunch) between parents and principal; (9) actively recruit community volunteers; and (10) send out school newsletters.

McBeath and others (1983a) found that administrators felt assigning homework was a way of involving parents in the school. A majority of the administrators surveyed also stated that parents wanted feedback from teachers and principals on how well their children were doing in school. The same study also found that successful school-community relations prevailed in schools which allowed citizens to use the library; advertised events by newspaper, radio, or television; had a cafeteria or restaurant service; or had gym or pool facilities to open to community members.

Other efforts which have proved successful in promoting good school community relations include:

- Developing citizen volunteer programs.
- Establishing senior citizen programs.
- Informing persons living near the school of school events.
- Having informal breakfasts, rap sessions, tours of the school.
- Inviting service clubs, etc., to meet in the school (Husen, 1982).

- Teaming citizens, faculty, and administrators to assess linkages to community groups that may not be reached.

- Identifying "opinion leaders" in the community and getting these individuals involved (Rogers, 1983).

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June 1984

This publication was prepared with funding from the National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Education under contract no. NIE-400-83-0023. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of NIE or the Department of Education.

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